

Trevor Griffiths's *The Party*:

A Study of Political Motivation of the Left-wing Middle Class Intellectual

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Trevor Griffiths's play, **The Party** (1973) tackles a series of debates between a group of socialist intellectuals on the contemporary state and future hopes of Marxism in a capitalist world. It is a product of that volatile year of 1968, when revolution in some form suddenly seemed possible and the 'European socialists rediscovered Trotsky'.¹⁾ As a consequence of 'the greatest popular insurrection ever experienced by a capitalist democracy in time of peace',²⁾ the strategies for revolutionary action became subject to widespread debate. Although the insurrection failed to effect any major immediate political changes, the fact that Paris had been so close to complete revolution stimulated the Left to re-examine classical theories about the necessary preconditions for revolution.

The direct inspiration for the play came from the actual political meetings held at the cottage of Tony Garnett, then a producer of socially committed documentaries for the BBC. In the meetings organised with the excitement over the highly potential, revolutionary Paris events, figures like Gerry Healy, then General Secretary of the Socialist Labour League (which became the Workers' Revolutionary Party), argued with theorists such as Robin Blackburn of the London School of Economics (LSE) and the *New Left Review*. But what caught Griffiths's dramatic imagination was a disparity between the mundane realities of the participants' lives and their stated revolutionary sentiments:

It started with a number of images . . . and what happened to me in

1) Ros Asquith, *The Observer*, 2 Sept. 1984.

2) David Coute, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968*. New York: Harper, 1988, p. 212.

1968, in France. And the American universities, the Blacks in Detroit, Watts. It started with the experience of the Friday night meetings at Tony Garnett's where sixty or seventy people would cram into a room . . . to do more, to get it right, to be correct, to read the situation as a first step towards changing it utterly...And with it all, the faint sense of, not silliness exactly, but lack of candour that people proffered. For example, in relating their life-roles to their abstracted revolutionary role. The lack of connection between what they did day-by-day and what they did night-by-night.³⁾

This gap between theory and praxis is suggested through the double-edged title of the play. 'The Party' means both the organised political party and its leadership and the wholly unorganised, domestic party of assorted left-wing intellectuals at the height of the Paris insurrections.

The play opens with a peculiar prologue where a Groucho Marx figure performs his comic stand-up routine. Standing in front of huge, projected portraits of the great historical revolutionaries such as Marx, Lenin and Trotsky and commenting on a few choice epigraphs from their thoughts, Groucho uncharacteristically lectures the audience. Citing some lines from Marx, Groucho characterises the bourgeois epoch as 'constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation' (98).⁴⁾ Then, he presents Lenin's critique of revolutionary phrase-making as little more than 'the repetition of revolutionary slogans irrespective of objective circumstances at a given turn of events, in the given state of affairs obtaining at the time' (98-99). Finally, he concludes his harangue with Marx's definition of money as the 'alienated power of humanity' (100).

The overall effect created by Groucho's performance — as his name suggests (he is Groucho Marx, not Karl Marx) — is one of travesty. The jokes and gibes, heaped upon the revolutionaries' obsolete, superannuated rhetoric,

3) Griffiths, interviewed by Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, 'Transforming the Husk of Capitalism', *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. VI, No. 22, 1976. p. 40.

4) Griffiths, *The Party*, *Trevor Griffiths: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996). The subsequent text quotations will be taken from this edition.

are deliberately cynical and derisive. There is a palpable disparity between the historical gravity and imperative meanings of the ideological statements and the flippant, ironic manner in which the comedian delivers them. Trifling with the revolutionary phrases until he is jaded and uninspired, Groucho eventually and blatantly reveals his primary concern, money: 'Why don't I keep my big trap in my pocket? That way I could smile while I counted my money' (97). Interrupted temporarily by Timon's earnest, passionate denunciation of the evils of gold, Groucho, unimpressed, jauntily spurns its antiquated rhetoric: 'There's nobody speaking like that anymore' (100). One of the central issues raised here is why the potentially intense revolutionary language fails to capture people's imagination, remaining only as flat, prosaic ideological abstractions. As Cave suggests, 'the play which follows is about why there is nobody speaking like Timon any more'.⁵⁾

Groucho's act dissolves promptly into a series of projected scenes from the Paris student uprising. Then again, these images are fused with the darkened bedroom of Joe Showcross, a successful TV director, where in 'a sort of abstracted fuck-ballet' (101) the audience sees him having unsatisfactory sex with his wife. The audience finally witnesses Joe masturbating in front of a wall-length mirror after his wife has gone out to meet her boyfriend.

This series of scenes acts as a frame which establishes an ironic distance from the following revolutionary debates among a group of Left intellectuals who arrive at Joe's well-appointed London SW 7 house. The breach between thought and action, form and content, on which Groucho's cynical comic turn capitalises, is brought into relief as these left-wing intellectuals flirt with revolutionary vocabularies without serious dedication. The issues raised in the comedian's quotations — such as economic reproduction which perpetuates the oppressive capitalist society, the hollowness of revolutionary rhetoric divorced from its practice, and the corroding power of money — become central to the play which explores the political and personal motivations of these intellectuals. The self-satisfaction suggested by Joe's masturbation is a theatrical metaphor of his (and his intellectual colleagues') pathetic lack of

5) Richard Allen Cave, *New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage 1970-1985*, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987, p. 226.

political commitment. The dispassionate intellectuals placate themselves with dogmatic, listless revolutionary language stripped of moral indignation and fervent desire for change. Ironically, Joe's failed sexual encounter is presented as one of a few flurries of *actual* action which occur throughout the long oratorio of talk and argument in the play.

As a probable beneficiary of the 1944 Education Act and a product of a process of *embourgeoisement* created by the *affluent* society in the late 1950s and 1960s, Joe has succeeded at the cost of separation from his working class origins (he finds flimsy excuses for not going North to visit his parents) and unease in his newly gained sphere. He is at the friction-point between working-class roots and middle-class life. Joe's unstable status, created by the gulf between his awareness of privilege and his guilt-ridden submission to the social structure which makes it possible, is disclosed through his ambivalent attitude towards his brother Eddie, a working-class lad who has come down from the north to ask for a loan to start his own small business. Interpreting Eddie's business ambition as an attempt to upgrade himself from employee to employer, that is, a minor act of capitalist investment, Joe consciously *adopts* an anti-capitalist stance, which is in glaring contradiction to his current bourgeois life. With the mixed feelings of guilt and filial duty, he speaks in the language of the left-wing intellectual, as he confesses to Sloman, an established dramatist and Joe's perpetual house guest:

It seems illogical to use my surpluses to help set up a capitalist enterprise, that's all . . . That's what it'll be, Malc. Our kid being the boss doesn't make it different or special. There'll be people working for him and he'll be making a profit on their labour, just as in any other capitalist enterprise. I ask myself: If this were someone else — not my brother — asking me to help him set up a shirt factory, what would I say? No, wouldn't I? And that fast too (120-121).

Thus how Joe will eventually respond to Eddie's pressing request becomes a significantly political decision and the final barometer of Joe's commitment.

Joe's troubled socialist conscience is illustrated ironically but most effectively when he explains to his wife Sloman's heavy drinking: 'He . . . can't

bear the thought of himself as . . . successful . . . in a society he longs to destroy' (105). Sloman's self-condemnation and sense of disorientation are equally applied to Joe, who also suffers an identity crisis. Sloman points out the ideological contradiction of Joe's profession as a liberal TV producer of socially committed drama. Dismissing *The Wednesday Play* programme, which Joe presses him to write a play for, as little more than a fragmentary humanist attempt at changing society, Sloman indicates the limitation of its political efficacy. He insists that the capitalist social fabric cannot be debilitated through any subversive TV drama:

The only thing you're allowed to put in to the system is that which can be assimilated and absorbed by it. Joe, this is a society that has 'matured' on descriptions of its inequality and injustice. Poverty is one of its best favoured *spectacles*. Bad housing, class-divisive schools, the plight of the sick and the aged, the alienating indignities of work, the fatuous vacuities of 'leisure' — Jesus God, man, we can't get enough of it. It's what makes us so 'humane', seeing all that, week in, week out . . . Wednesday Plays? It's the Liberal heartland, Joe. Every half-grown, second rate, soft-bowelled pupa in grub street is in there fighting with you. It's the consensus. It's the condition of our time. Impetigo. Pink. Itchy. Mildly catching (174-175).

Sloman's Marcussian critique of revolutionary permissiveness not only poses a central crisis for the radical artist in a repressively tolerant so-called *culture industry*, but also illuminates a dilemma of the left-wing intellectual as a cultural producer. Disgusted at his own impotence as a subversive writer within a capitalist society, Sloman criticises the ugliness of the self-deluding pragmatism of Joe, whose only link with Paris is that he is currently working on a project with Jean Luc Godard. Sloman posits that Joe's liberalism is a compromised consent to the repressive status quo:

It's sort of . . . presumption you have that you're different, Joe. That's all. Nothing else. And you're not. There is nothing . . . objectively . . . to distinguish you from all the rest . . . You occupy the same relationship

to the means of production as every other . . . producer in that golden hutch at Would Not Lane you call the Centre. Socialist? A socialist producer? What's that? It's irrelevant . . . Joe, you have no right to expect anything other than a fake. Any more than the rest have. The pimps. The gold lame boys. The shredders. The suckers-in. The apologies for the system. The machine's maintenance men (173).

Joe's tortured indecisiveness results from his conscious attempts to be numb to his contradictory lifestyle and to sustain his self-loathing. In every sense, Joe's feeble response to Sloman's continuing criticism forms the core of the play: 'I just once . . . want to say yes to something' (175). Thus, the socialist gathering in his place is revealed partly as Joe's desperate search for something to say 'yes' to. Representing the dilemmas of the left-wing bourgeois intellectual (and further, illuminating some of the failures of the Left's intellectual leadership) in the late 1960s, Joe is intended to be the hub of the play. As Griffiths explained, 'I wanted to set one person in the centre of all that reverberance and resonance, set a life in that, and a set of relationships and see what happened'.⁶ Joe's personal and moral predicaments — the uneasy relationship with Eddie and the crumbling marital crisis — frame the arguments put across in the meeting. According to Joe's introduction, the meeting has been called to identify how to ignite the same kind of revolutionary flare in Britain in the heady light of events in Paris. He presides over the meeting without expressing his own opinions or without any discernible zest: 'I'm not a member of the Party, but I'm convinced that what the Left in Britain needs now more than ever is a united and coherent focus for its efforts. But above all, we need theory. Not necessarily the RSP [Revolutionary Socialist Party]'s but a genuine socialist analysis of our situation that will give us a rational basis for political action beyond the single issue activities that have kept us fragmented and . . . impotent . . . in the past' (131).

The intellectuals trooping one by one into Joe's house represent various degrees of opportunism and commitment across the spectrum of the Left:

6) Griffiths, 'Transforming the Husk of Capitalism', p. 42.

students who are eager but have probably never rubbed shoulders with the real proletariat, an agitprop street theatre activist with the typical anarchist hatred of organisation and sedentary arguments, an urbane, money-grubbing young publisher who is organising a new radical magazine, a London School of Economics professor, a female journalist employed on the woman's page of *The Guardian* (she is also Joe's ex-wife), and a national organiser for the Trotskyite RSP.

A motley group of *parlour revolutionaries* of predominantly middle class origin was similarly satirised, in Howard Brenton's 1976 play *Weapons of Happiness*, via the character of Janis, a working class leader of uneducated, socially alienated factory workers. She was a plaything, patronised by the middle-class do-gooders: 'I was their pet, in a way. Real, wasn't I. The real stuff. Proletarian. Na, they were all right I s'pose. Kept on wanting a poke me rigid though, some of 'em . . .'⁷⁾ Throughout the play, the potential revolutionary moment in Paris is mediated through newspapers, television broadcasting or voices on the telephone. The actual Paris events are broadcast on a TV set in the living room, and also projected onto a screen above the action, so that the audience is not only constantly informed of actual historical events, but also, allowed to compare the real revolutionary struggles across the Channel with the group's desperate attempts to come to terms with the events through restrained, even torpid discussion.

This distance and detachment is, in a sense, what these loquacious revolutionaries really want. They are free to talk. More often than not, they seem to enjoy this *safety net*. 'Paris is a situation they choose to keep at a necessary distance precisely because it tests the strength of their commitment'.⁸⁾ At one point, Sloman, drowning himself in drink, criticises the intellectuals, saying, 'What do you lot know, eh. Any of you? Preening. Preening. On the screen. It doesn't hurt, does it? Any of it. (*At the main group*) Does it!!'(143). The sense of insubstantiality and intangibility created by the armchair revolutionaries' circuitous, imaginary engagement with the real

7) Howard Brenton, *Weapons of Happiness*, *Brenton: Plays One*, London: Methuen, 1986, p. 210.

8) Cave, p. 227.

revolutionary moment is amplified as the fundamentally naturalistic set is temporarily transformed into a rather surrealistic atmosphere: *'Living-room lights up, as Joe re-enters . . . People sit or lie. Lights lower than before, no longer quite natural'* (148). This unreal sense reaches its grotesquely absurd height when the members of the party haggle over the agenda. The audience watches the party members watching each other. The bickering around whether or not to have a chair for the proceeding continues for some time and every member's carefully guarded viewpoint prevents the party from progressing until one of the students desperately urges them to move forward: *'Come on, come on. There's twenty thousand people contesting state power in Paris and we can't even decide what to talk about! . . . Say something eh'* (134).

Set against the urgency of the situation, the opening speech made by Andrew Ford, the sociology lecturer from the LSE, embarrasses the audience (as well as the on-stage audience) because of his pedantic phraseology and seminar voice. An exponent of the revisionist Marcussian theory of repressive tolerance, he rejects the outdated, traditional, Marxist model of revolution based on the contradictions of capitalism and the working class as a subversive force. The proletariat, absorbed into bourgeois institutions by the subtle mechanism of the modern benevolent state which will let its dissidents go so far but no further, do not perceive themselves as being set against an oppressive bourgeois class: *'The very fact of being tolerated tends to render us impotent'* (138). He even foresees the shift of revolutionary focus to national liberation movements in the Third World: *'The "weak link" in the capitalist chain is now at the periphery, and it is there, if anywhere, that the chain will be induced to snap'* (138).

Rather than being a genuine radical contribution, Ford's self-satisfied speech is an intricately arranged lecture which only amuses the speaker with its recondite ideas about 'centres' and 'epi-centres' of political activity. His peremptory tone of voice, abstract language and rhetorical technique betray the degree of his detachment from any direct engagement with his thesis. In the mouth of Ford who insists upon the proletariat's loss of revolutionary potential, Marx's words achieve an iridescent ambivalence.⁹ This divorce of

theory from practice is similarly exposed by Martin Glass in David Edgar's 1983 play, *Maydays*, where the middle-class dissident searches for his own identity: 'I rather like the twists and turns. Trying to bend and coil the dialectic, just so far it wouldn't snap'.¹⁰ Denis Quilley, who played the role of Ford in the 1973 National Theatre production at the Old Vic in London, concentrated exactly on the lack of vehemence and fervour in Ford's language. As Cave points out, Quilley's Ford, intended to be pompous, impenetrable and obviously bound for the main chance in his career, caught all the features of such fashionable figures: 'Quilley's Ford could make the specious sound meaningful by virtue of his technique . . . [Quilley] extended the type to include a degree of self-awareness; the charm had become a conscious part of the act, the last resort of a practised hand at appealing for sympathy to relieve him of the need to gain attention by genuinely stimulating thought, since such originality was patently quite beyond his intellectual powers'.¹¹

Ford's analytical model as well as his manner of speaking is immediately questioned and challenged by each listener who feels that the specific group s/he represents (blacks, students, women and even social democrats) has been omitted. Ford's jargon empty of any serious belief or vision, is exposed as ineffectual and self-referential: 'Blacks and students, sure. Nobody's denying their importance. All I've tried to do is give a general theoretical framework into which they can fit . . .' (139) The debate is exhausted and an apparent absence of direction becomes evident as the members are unable to translate their words into concrete actions, and constantly rage against their own impotence. Joe's reaction clearly reflects the absence of any real connection with those who are exploited and whose cause the intellectuals seem to uphold. For many of them, left-wing politics are only a self-regarding game where it is more important to win an argument at the dinner table than the real battle at the barricades:

9) Christian Thomsen, 'Three Socialist Playwrights: John McGrath, Caryl Churchill, Trevor Griffiths', *Contemporary English Drama*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 19, London: Edward Arnold, 1981, p. 173.

10) Edgar, *Maydays*, *Edgar: Plays Three*, London: Methuen, 1991, p. 260.

11) Cave, p. 228.

We do this like we do everything else. It's a game . . . It's an intellectual pursuit. Or something worse. It's part of being . . . bourgeois. Peel the onion: find the nuance beneath the hint, the insight in the discrimination, the complexity below the conceit' (147).

Ford's language game, played out at one remove from political urgency and reality, is immediately countered by John Tagg, a veteran Trotskyist whose working class background distinguishes him from the largely middle class intellectuals. Tagg, played by Laurence Olivier in the 1973 production, was powerfully persuasive not only because Tagg was depicted as a man of action (he is the only person in the play who attempts to establish contact by telephone with his fellow-activists in Paris), but also because his speech was 'dramaturgically very skilfully constructed on a crest of rising expectation'.¹² Even before Tagg appears in the already full room, he is an object of fear within the complacent middle-class circle. Craggy-faced and with the stunted physique which suggests his lifetime battle against a hostile political climate, he is visibly and audibly an alien figure. He sits modestly and says a few trivial words, and then listens in threatening silence, waiting for his chance to take control of the debate. The audience feels Tagg's dominant presence, and sees Ford's 'lecture' being watched silently and menacingly by him. In his turn, he effectively penetrates Ford's hollow, theoretical framework which is 'simply part of an elaborate game he enjoys playing and plays well' (152). Aware of the state of widespread disaffection and inertia the revolutionary left has fallen into, Tagg argues that the real problem is the facile despair of the left-wing intellectuals who have lost contact with the proletariat and he asserts that the working-class has lost its revolutionary zeal. They do not confront their own frustration, simply turning their attention to the other repressed groups: 'blacks, students, homosexuals, terrorist groupings, Mao, Che Guevara, anybody, just so long as they represent some repressed minority still capable of anger and the need for self-assertion' (151). Tagg's great expository speech cuts through the intellectuals' comfortable self-delusion. This drastic indictment of everyone else on stage is the most challenging moment in the

12) Thomsen, p. 173.

play. In a speech of dazzling rhetoric with a guttural Glaswegian accent, he castigates all these parlour intellectuals firmly ensconced in their cynicism:

You start from the presumption that only you are intelligent and sensitive enough to see how bad capitalist society is. Do you really think the young man who spends his whole life in monotonous and dehumanizing work doesn't see it too? And in a way more deeply, more woundingly? (*Pause.*) Suddenly you lose contact — not with ideas, not with abstractions, concepts, because they're after all your stock-in-trade. You lose contact with the moral tap-roots of socialism. In an objective sense, you actually stop believing in a revolutionary perspective, in the possibility of a socialist society and the creation of socialist man. You see the difficulties, you see the complexities and contradictions, and you settle for those as a sort of game you can play with each other. Finally, you learn to enjoy your pain; to need it, so that you have nothing to offer your bourgeois peers but a sort of moral exhaustion (151).

Tagg's bitter critique of the impotent intellectuals is then redirected becoming a fierce attack on Stalinism, and his calm breaks into passion and hatred as he argues that the European and American proletariats have been consistently and systematically betrayed by their defunct leadership and by the European communist parties in particular. Tagg insists on the need to build genuine, vital revolutionary leadership which could develop into a disciplined and patient organisation without any trace of Stalinism. He then concludes with one final challenge to the intellectuals: 'The intellectual's problem is not vision, it's commitment. You enjoy biting the hand that feeds you, but you'll never bite it off' (155). In the same logic, he dismisses the French students as similarly unwilling to give up their future positions, guaranteed by bourgeois class privilege.

Coming from the long-suppressed conscience of the Left, Tagg's incisive insistence on a complete return to basic socialist principles is disturbing to the intellectuals, and this is immediately reflected in their embittered, sullen dispersal in Act Two. Tagg's indomitable, unflagging socialist virtues, which

have been forged through a long process of stoic self-denial, and his complete absence of scepticism overawe Joe. Tagg looks around his smart flat before he simply comments, 'I'm proletarian. I killed the [civilised] worm before it turned . . . Mebbe you should've done the same' (166). However, even if Tagg's critique of the intellectual classes is the play's centrepiece and he personifies, to a certain degree, a messianic vision of a New Socialist Man, Griffiths does not allow the audience to see Tagg in a totally positive light. Whether the dispersal of the revolutionaries, caused by Tagg's relentless indictment of the intellectuals, indicates a genuine change in their attitude is, deliberately, not clear. In a sense, it becomes 'a study of the strengths and weaknesses of Tagg's puritan conscience'.¹³ The audience's ambivalent attitudes to him comes from his dauntingly single-minded ruthlessness in his commitment to his cause. This can be seen in the cynicism of his phone-call to Paris when he is heard agreeing with his activist group's decision to withdraw from the barricades. For him, the only revolutionary task is to build the party, not to support a bunch of anarchists running riot through Paris. When he dismisses the specific causes of blacks, women and what he quaintly refers to as 'social deviants', he is rigid. Tagg bears a striking resemblance to Kabak in **Occupations**. As Thomsen claims, 'convincing as it sounds as long as he talks, the limitations soon become obvious: worn-out slogans, the obsession with the past'.¹⁴ Furthermore, the fruitlessness of his life-long revolutionary work and the inability of the proletariat to seize the chance for revolution are emphasised by the cancer which consumes him. Tagg's revolutionary maxim — 'We only die when we fail to take root in others' — is in every sense persuasive. But, ironically, Tagg's relationship with the members of the group is proved to be one of isolation. It activates the members' guilt, placing him quite beyond the reach of his appeal for sympathy.

Structurally, Tagg's argument is fractured by Sloman in Act Two, who has spent most of the time staggering around in a drunken display of abusive heckling and conveying all the self-destructive rage of a man who deeply feels that his socialist dream might not be realised. Now Sloman predicts that the

13) Cave, p. 231.

14) Thomsen, p. 173.

workers will rise spontaneously in their own good time, without any assistance from any Trotskyist leader. Drawing on the memories of his exploited working-class father, Sloman argues:

There'll be a revolution and another, and another, because the capacity for 'adjustment' and 'adaptation' within capitalism is not, contrary to popular belief, infinite. And when 'masses' of people, masses mind, decide to take on the state and the ruling class, they won't wait for the word from the 'authentic voice of Trotsky' or anyone else. They'll be too busy 'practicing' the revolution; . . . And they'll find the 'germ' from inside the class, not from 'outside'. Because the germ's there, the virus is there, and however many generations of workers are pumped full of antibiotics or the pink placebos of late capitalism, it will persist, the virus, under the skin, waiting (179).

Although the argument virtually concludes the play, it is not intended as a definitive conclusion or a politically correct statement; it remains rather as another option for further discussion. Sloman's argument sounds passionate and sincere, compared with Ford's well-rehearsed lecture, but 'its weakness is the way in which Sloman continually talks of "they"', leaving him only 'the role of fatalistic voyeurism'.¹⁵⁾ He rejects all theory in favour of an almost biological determinism coupled with ambiguous faith in the potential of man. As Griffiths commented, Sloman's view is 'a very imprecise and to some extent a romantic formulation of the revolutionary process, but at least it is pointing to an argument which says that the working class itself has got to clean its house before it can relate to leadership, create leadership that is vital and that will change the situation'.¹⁶⁾

Carne argued that 'Tagg's power and what it reveals about the connection between thought and action' has caused a change in each of the intellectuals,¹⁷⁾ and Asquith also claimed that after Tagg's relentless criticism, 'his listeners melt away, but they are changed'.¹⁸⁾ But Griffiths scripts Tagg's

15) John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, London: Macmillan, 1984, p. 128.

16) Griffiths, interviewed by Pat Silburn, *Gambit* (No. 29, 1976), p. 31.

17) Rosalind Carne, *The Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1984.

climactic speech to be received by the group not with a sense of reinvigorated commitment, but with the sound of coffee cups brought in on a trolley by an *au pair* from Communist Czechoslovakia. There is no distinctive change in the characters at the end of the play. When it does end, not much happens: a student goes off to France, Ford looks set to become a professor and Joe and his wife deliberately avoid direct communication with each other. Instead of the various options that were offered to him during the course of the evening, what actually occurs for Joe is that he agrees to give Eddie, who was out whoring on the town, the business money. The last image is of Joe, holding in his arms the pet guinea pig, whose squeals are reminiscent of Malcolm's squeaks of pain. Even though Joe is a recognisable, sympathetic figure, Griffiths permits the audience to respond to his psychological meandering and incapacitating loss of identity in a critical way. As Dunn correctly points out, 'Shawcross is the most difficult role. His is a personal story, played parallel to the debate but not to be given the weight of personal sympathy that the confused liberal hero usually evokes on the English stage'.¹⁹ As Shulman suggests, the only future for Joe, who is not only sexually impotent but intellectually reduced to silence, would eventually lie with the yet-to-be formed SDP.²⁰ Frustration continues to dominate and the Groucho figure's ironic attitude prevails, '*Je Suis Marxiste, Tendance Groucho*' (101). The play's pervasive contradictions are thrown back upon the audience, which is forced to interrogate its own situation and is continually challenged to identify possible alternatives.

Although many critics recognised Tagg's speech as the *tour de force* of the play, it is a misreading of **The Party** to see Tagg's position as Griffiths's point of view. The dialectics in **The Party** may have been created largely by argument alone, and many of the contradictions besetting the characters were described rather than woven into the plot. But the pervading critical irony makes the audience question all of the speeches and statements in the play. As an examination of various cross-currents of the neuroses, personal

18) Ros Asquith, *The Observer*, 2 Sept. 1984.

19) Tony Dunn, *Plays & Players*, Jun. 1985 (No. 381), p. 33.

20) Milton Shulman, *Evening Standard*, 16 Apr. 1985.

insecurities and obsessions of the Left intellectuals who never give up their positions of success and privilege, **The Party** effectively retrieves into debate the question of political motivation, of the relationship between socialists and socialism.